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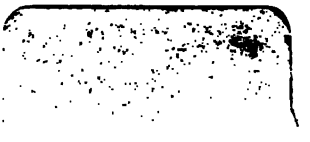

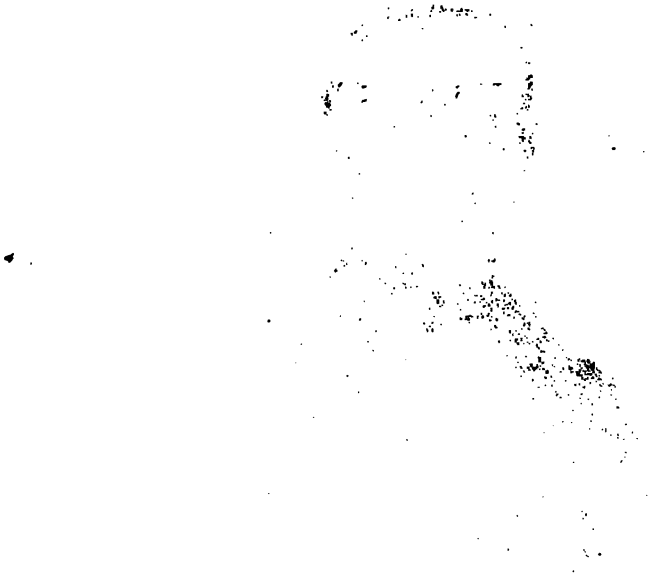

MEMOIR

OF

NATHANIEL INGERSOLL BOWDITCH.

PREPARED AGREEABLY TO A RESOLUTION

OF THE

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

BY REV. S. K. LOTHROP, D.D.

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MEMOIR

OF

NATHANIEL INGERSOLL BOWDITCH.

NATHANIEL INGERSOLL BOWDITCH was born at Salem, Mass., on the 17th of June, 1805. The first American ancestor of his family was William Bowditch, who emigrated from England, probably from the city of Exeter or its immediate vicinity, and settled in Salem, in 1639. He left an only child, William; who died in 1681, leaving also an only child, named William. This third William had a numerous family (eleven children); but only one of his sons, Ebenezer, left any male descendants. The fifth child of Ebenezer, Habakkuk, born in 1738, had seven children; of whom the fourth was the late Nathaniel Bowditch, LL.D., — a man whose extraordinary genius and large contributions to nautical and astronomical science have procured him an endearing and world-wide fame, and caused his name to be known and his authority to be trusted wherever a ship spreads its sails upon the ocean; while the noble qualities of his heart, the perfect truthfulness of his character, the integrity, purity, simplicity, and benevolent usefulness of his life, secured him the respect and confidence of all who knew him, and the warmest affections and the most profound reverence of those who shared the honor of his intimate personal friendship.

This justly celebrated and honored person (Nathaniel Bowditch, LL.D.) died in March, 1838, leaving six children; the

eldest of whom was Nathaniel Ingersoll, the subject of this memoir. His mother was Mary Ingersoll, daughter of Jonathan Ingersoll, Esq. She was married to his father, who was her cousin, in October, 1800. Mrs. Mary Bowditch was a remarkable person: one of those women whose characters are so perfectly moulded and rounded out, without deficiency or redundance in any of the parts; in whom the higher elements of intellectual and moral thought are so blended with tenderness, compassion, sympathy, all soft, gentle, and graceful qualities, — that we find it difficult to tell whether love or reverence is the strongest emotion we feel towards them. Exceedingly attractive in person, winning and gracious in manners, cheerful in disposition, with a vigorous mind enriched by culture, and a warm and loving heart, full of all gentle and generous affections; her whole being impregnated, elevated, guided by religious faith and principle, — she was the moral sunlight of her dwelling; made her home a type and miniature of heaven, the scene of the highest happiness, the source of the holiest influences, to its inmates. Perhaps no woman ever had a nobler monument than that reared to her by her husband, who dedicates his great work, the "Translation and Commentary on the 'Mécanique Céleste' of La Place," "To the memory of his wife, Mary Bowditch, who devoted herself to her domestic avocations with great judgment, unceasing kindness, and a zeal which could not be surpassed; taking upon herself the whole care of her family, and thus procuring for him the leisure hours to prepare the work, and securing to him, by her prudent management, the means for its publication in its present form, which she fully approved: and, without her approbation, the work would not have been undertaken."

Family tradition has not transmitted any very striking incidents or indications in the childhood and school-days of our subject; but with such parents, and under the influences that pervaded his home, we are not surprised to find that he

was ready for college, so far as the acquisition of knowledge was requisite, at a very early age; and actually entered the University at Cambridge in August, 1818, a few weeks after he was thirteen years old. He was the youngest in his class: too young, probably, for the full benefit to be derived from the course of studies then pursued at Cambridge; and certainly too young to be exposed to perilous snares and temptations incident to the liberty which, to a certain extent, necessarily appertains to college-life. No stain of vice or moral wrong rests upon his pure spirit; but, led away by older students, he yielded to the temptations of college-life so far as to be guilty of some boyish follies, and such thoughtless waste of time and opportunity, that, toward the close of the freshman-year, his father, at the suggestion of the faculty, removed him from college for some months. In some brief but amusing memoranda of a speech he expected to be called upon to make at the alumni dinner in 1854, but at which he "happily escaped any molestation," there is an allusion to this: —

> "I was," he says, "the youngest and smallest of my class, and was everywhere known as Little Bowditch. I was entirely verdant and unsophisticated, and almost immediately began to pick up college accomplishments, which occupied more of my time and attention than was consistent with a due regard to other studies, and which finally led to my having permission to visit my friends for a few months before I had finished my freshman-year. On my return, my old associations had been broken up; and I have always felt grateful to our Alma Mater for the discipline to which I was thus seasonably and happily subjected."

Undoubtedly this discipline, through the mortification and sorrow it caused him, aided by parental counsels and affection, and the sympathy and influence of a valued friend, Henry Pinckney, Esq., became a signal benefit and blessing to him. He returned to college, no longer a boy, but a man, with a just appreciation of the purpose of college and

the duties of life. He fully redeemed his character; passed the remainder of his college-life, not only with an unblemished, but with a distinguished, reputation for conduct and scholarship; and graduated, in 1822, with a high rank in his class. He had already decided upon his profession; and, immediately after graduating, he entered upon the study of law in the office of B. R. Nichols, Esq., then residing in Salem. In 1823, Dr. Bowditch, after repeated solicitations, accepted the office, for which he had rare and unsurpassed qualifications, of Actuary of the Massachusetts-Hospital Life-Insurance Company, and removed to Boston to discharge its duties. On the removal of the family to Boston, Nathaniel Ingersoll entered the office of that very distinguished counsellor, Hon. William Prescott; who had associated with him, at the time, his son-in-law, the late Franklin Dexter, Esq. Here Mr. Bowditch continued and completed his studies; and was admitted to the bar in October, 1825.

Immediately on his admission, Mr. Dexter received him as a partner in business. But this connection did not last long; as Mr. Bowditch soon began to manifest those tastes, and form those habits of study and investigation, which led to the adoption of the *speciality* (viz., conveyancing) in which he became subsequently so distinguished an authority, that scarcely a transfer of real estate was made in the city of Boston, without the title passing under his examination and approval. He seems to have been originally led into this department of his profession by his interest in genealogy, especially the genealogy of the Bowditch Family. His first studies in the musty volumes in the Register-of-Deeds Office were for the purpose of tracing or confirming genealogical descent. He wanted to find or establish some name; and he looked into old deeds to ascertain it. From the names attached, he passed naturally to the contents of the deed, its description of the property conveyed, its recital of boundaries, &c.; and thus what at

first was secondary began to be of primary interest to him, and he devoted himself to investigations in the Register-of-Deeds Office. At first, his father, who wished him to "practise law" and to become eminent as an advocate in the courts, was much annoyed at what seemed to him such a waste of time among old deeds; but the young man followed his instincts, and followed them to a great success. Early in his career, he argued two or three causes with great ability, and to the great acceptance of his clients; but he soon retired from the courts altogether as an advocate, and devoted himself exclusively to conveyancing, and to such studies and investigations as appertained to it. By the most thorough and laborious diligence, he made himself master of the history and titles of all the real estate in Boston; and a letter from Lord Lyndhurst, among his papers, shows that he had a reputation, and was regarded as an authority upon this subject, far beyond the limits of Massachusetts. The speciality to which Mr. Bowditch devoted himself is not, as some suppose, in a great measure mechanical and clerical, requiring only an accurate knowledge and a careful collation of recited facts. It requires a mind competent to classify and arrange these facts, understand their origin, and their relation to obsolete or existing statutes. It embraces and demands not only a thorough knowledge of these statutes, but a perfect comprehension of all the subtle and profound principles upon which all the laws in relation to real property, the creation of estates equitable or legal, and the determination of the powers and limitations under which conveyance or transfer may be made, are founded. The correspondence to which allusion has been made, the questions propounded by Lord Lyndhurst, and the answers made by Mr. Bowditch, afford clear indication that the latter fully comprehended these principles, their various sources and applications. In this correspondence, the then Lord Chancellor of England says, "The name and character of Mr. Bowditch has long been familiar to me; and the full

and accurate information upon the subject to which I referred has left me nothing to desire." A higher or more honorable testimony to Mr. Bowditch's reputation in that department of his profession to which he specially devoted himself, need not, as it could not, be adduced.

But though he thus devoted himself with singular assiduity to a specific department of his profession, and obtained in that speciality an honorable reputation at home and abroad, he was "well read in the law" generally, understood its great principles as they are embodied in particular statutes, and made applicable in the various questions arising in the business and intercourse of society; and though never appearing before the courts as an advocate, yet, in other ways, he often made good use and valuable exposition of his legal learning and acumen. In proof of this, reference might be made to various articles upon legal matters published from time to time in the newspapers; to his remarks before the Judiciary Committee of the Senate of Massachusetts, on "Wharf Property, or the Law of Flats;" and to his argument, made "merely as a citizen of Boston, anxious that its public faith and good name should be preserved inviolate," before the Joint Committee of the City Councils on Public Lands, in behalf of "a Catholic Church on the Jail Lands."

And here we pass naturally from the lawyer to the citizen and the man. It is in the high principles, the noble aims, the generous sympathies, the wise and benevolent usefulness, he exhibited in these broader relations, that we are to look for the chief interest that attaches to the character of Mr. Bowditch, and the honor and esteem in which his memory is held. He was public-spirited; recognizing all the claims of society upon its members; and always interested in whatever promised to promote the comfort, the happiness, the intellectual and moral improvement, of others. He was a close observer of passing events, and by his pen, through the daily press, frequently expressed his opinions upon them; and in articles,

longer or shorter, often as full of wit as of wisdom, of humor as of sound judgment, brought his influence to bear on the various subjects, efforts, and enterprises that were attracting the attention of the public mind at the time. Upon principle, and from the impulses of quick and generous sympathies, Mr. Bowditch was charitable, a liberal giver from his private purse, and a faithful worker in the wise and efficient direction of public charitable or philanthropic institutions. For thirty-four years (from 1827 to 1861), he was connected with the Massachusetts General Hospital; nine years as secretary, fourteen years as trustee and chairman of the Board, and eleven years as vice-president. He did not simply discharge the routine duties of these offices. He was deeply interested in the institution itself, and an active agent in all measures to enlarge its means and increase its usefulness. In 1851, there was printed, for private distribution, a volume of four hundred and forty-two pages, — "A History of the Massachusetts General Hospital." The volume contains a full, minute, and accurate account of this noble institution, from its first inception in 1810 to its condition in 1851; and is a most valuable contribution to the local history of our city and state. It was prepared by Mr. Bowditch, and published at his own expense. This is modestly intimated by the closing paragraph of the preface, in which he says, "It is due to the institution to say, that this is not, in any sense, an official publication, but merely a private and humble contribution in its behalf, a slight and inadequate expression of the interest felt in its welfare, by one who has ever regarded as among his happiest hours those which he has been privileged to spend in its service."

As the Massachusetts General Hospital, through its distinguished surgeons, Dr. J. C. Warren and Dr. George Hayward, made the first public experiments in the use of sulphuric ether as an anæsthetic agent in surgical operations, the whole subject of the "Ether Discovery" is very fully treated in

this volume. One hundred and thirty pages are devoted to it. It will be remembered that this discovery, and the question whether Dr. W. T. G. Morton or Dr. C. T. Jackson had the best claim to be regarded as the author of the discovery, was the subject of an earnest discussion. Mr. Bowditch gives a list of all the publications on the subject, from 1846 to 1849, with a critical review of the most important of them; and presents the fairest, the most comprehensive, and the best account of the controversy, and of the question at issue, that can be found.

Here also, in his connection with the Hospital, Mr. Bowditch found ample opportunities for the exercise of his private charities; and, as various notes and letters found among his papers indicate, many of the patients at that institution had reason to be grateful, not only for its direct benefits, but for the circumstance, that, through confinement there, they found in him a friend and benefactor, who, by his judicious counsels, personal sympathy, and pecuniary aid, did much to lighten to them the weary burden of sickness and poverty.

On all political questions which came up in the progress of public affairs, Mr. Bowditch had, as in all other matters, very decided opinions, and, when necessary, gave utterance to them in conversation as a man, and expression to them by his vote as a citizen; but he took no active part in politics, and never held any civil office. In the large and generous culture of his mind; in the studies and duties of his profession, more particularly in the speciality to which he devoted himself; in the discharge of his duties as a trustee of the Hospital, the favorite sphere of his activity; and in the quiet exercise of a large and unostentatious charity, commonly bestowing its gifts in the Christian spirit, that permits not the left hand to know what the right hand doeth, — he passed on from the opening to the full meridian of manhood, when, just as his life and character seemed rounded out to perfect matu-

rity, giving promise of increasing usefulness for many years, an accident happened, which deprived him of the power of locomotion, confining him first to his chamber, and then to his bed; from which, after more than two years of suffering patiently borne, he was carried to his grave.

But though thus deprived of bodily activity, and denied daily intercourse with the world at large, his mind was still active, his heart warm, and his interest in all that affected the good of others continued unabated. This interest was manifested in various ways, — in numberless good deeds to the friends who visited him, in kind remembrances to many who did not see him, and in *one act*, the noblest and most important in his life; viz., the establishment, in the autumn of 1860, of sixteen scholarships at Harvard College, four for each class, with an annual income of two hundred and fifty dollars for each scholarship. The sum requisite for this noble foundation was seventy thousand dollars. In 1835, Mr. Bowditch married Elizabeth B., the second daughter of the late Ebenezer Francis, Esq. His professional income, both before and after his marriage, was not small; and a goodly portion of it was always devoted to charities. But, of course, it was from the property that came to his wife from her father's estate that he was enabled to make this magnificent contribution to the interests of education and learning. In the credit and honor, therefore, of this good deed, Mrs. Bowditch is entitled to share equally with him. If the first suggestion, the purpose, the earnest wish, originated with him, her consent and approval were necessary to the execution of that purpose, the accomplishment of that wish; and their joint action necessary to the result reached, while it is a testimony to the genuine interest which each felt in the College and the increase of its beneficent instrumentalities, is also a most beautiful testimony to their harmony of soul, to the mutual confidence and affection, which made their union holy and happy.

The importance of these scholarships, which are modestly described in the Catalogue of the University as "founded by a friend of the College, and called the 'President's Scholarships,'" may be estimated by the following extracts from President Felton's letters, in the correspondence which was held on the subject:—

"I am impressed," he writes under date of Aug. 13, 1860, "by the generous purpose, entertained by Mrs. Bowditch and yourself, in behalf of young men struggling with poverty in the effort to obtain an education. On this subject, I can speak from a most instructive experience; and I know, that, whatever may be the advantages of poverty in developing some of the sterner qualities of character, there is a limit beyond which the advantages are more than counterbalanced by the evils. The anxieties under which a young man suffers, who knows not, from quarter to quarter, how his bills are to be paid, are among the worst enemies of study. The mind should be calm, free from serious cares at least, or Latin, Greek, and mathematics will inevitably suffer. I have, therefore, no doubt that one of the most useful modes of employing wealth is in furnishing aid to young men of character and talent, who will render services to their country and mankind."

In another letter, under date of Oct. 8, 1860, President Felton says,—

"The new scholarships excite great interest throughout New England. I receive letters of inquiry almost daily. In truth, it is not only a most munificent act, but one which will for ever continue to bless the community. Your foundation will educate sixteen young men as long as the College shall stand. In a century, four hundred men of character and ability will have been added to the liberally educated workers in the community by this timely and generous gift. I am deeply gratified that such an addition has been made to the means of doing good possessed by the University, at the beginning of my presidency. I hail it as a favorable omen."

Possessing the ability, it must have been a glorious relief to the tedium of sickness, to perform such a noble act as the foundation of these scholarships; while the act itself is an

unequivocal evidence and illustration of character, of the wisdom that conceived and the benevolence that executed it.

In 1857, Mr. Bowditch, led thereto by his long studies and researches in the Registry of Deeds, had printed, for private distribution, a few copies of a collection of curious surnames. This volume was entitled "Suffolk Surnames." In 1858, the volume having awakened an interest beyond the circle of his personal friends, he printed another edition, with additional names, and a dedication "To the memory of A. Shurt, the father of American conveyancing, whose name is associated alike with my daily toilet and my daily occupation." In February, 1861, a few weeks before his decease, he completed the publication of a third edition of "Suffolk Surnames," a volume of seven hundred and fifty-nine pages, — seven times the size of that printed in 1859. The preface to this volume closes with a reference to himself, the facts, the humor, and the pathos of which seem to make it an appropriate close to this notice of him: —

"I will conclude with a few words of 'personal explanation.' I was born in 1805. Of a vigorous frame and active habits, I enjoyed, for fifty years, almost uninterrupted health. During the summer months, I seldom omitted a daily swim in Charles River; and the coldest weather of winter rarely induced me to resort to an outside garment. In 1835, on a bridal tour, I visited Niagara, and swam across that river, below the Falls, on two successive days; and once, when the thermometer was below zero, the gentlemen who had gathered round the fire in an insurance-office in Boston, proposed, as I entered the room, to subscribe to buy me an overcoat, because, they said, it made them cold to look at me. At fifty, however, I ceased to be a young man; and my dress was no longer such as to exert a chilling influence upon my friends. In February, 1859, I slipped upon the ice, but did not fall; and I supposed that I had escaped with only a slight sprain, and the laugh of the bystanders. I had, however, injured the head of the thigh-bone; and the result was a gradually increasing lameness. In June, I removed to my summer residence in Brookline. Here, in an apartment curtained by forest-trees, I sat, day after day, week after week, a prisoner;

my sole occupation being the collection and arrangement of the materials for the present edition, and the laborious preparation of the index. On Aug. 2, a visit was made by my attending surgeons. I arose to receive them; and, in the effort to open the drawer of a small writing-table which was partly behind me, I pulled it out so that it fell upon the floor. From this slight cause, a severe fracture of the thigh occurred while I was standing up. I have been thenceforth condemned to a state of horizontal meditation, which must last as long as I live. Twice already I have seen the foliage of summer give place to the snows of winter. My misfortune has received every alleviation which science could suggest, or the kindness of family and friends bestow; but my bodily pain and weariness soon made some fixed employment almost indispensable. I accordingly commenced the printing of this work in the autumn of 1859; and it has enabled me to attain a state of cheerful discomfort. . . . If my volume shall sometimes dispel the cloud of care or thought from the brow of manhood, or call forth a smile upon the face of youth and beauty, I may perhaps hope, if not for the sympathy, at least for the indulgence, of my readers."

It is hardly necessary to add, that Mr. Bowditch's cheerfulness was the product of religious faith. As he met the duties of life with a strong conviction of responsibleness to God, so he met its trials and sufferings with a deep feeling of trust and submission to him. In a letter to a near relative, on the 1st of January, 1860, he says, —

"The arrival of a new year is always a matter of interest. These milestones of life are always looked at for a moment by the busiest and happiest traveller; and no one, situated as I am and must expect to be, can fail to be impressed with a conviction, that a much longer journey is hardly to be expected or desired. To be a burden to others (however cheerfully and kindly the burden may be borne) is not an agreeable prospect; and I cannot but fear that I am to have much and increasing pain to go through with in the coming months. However, no one stops by the way. Every thing proceeds as orderly; and I shall endeavor to reconcile myself to my changed prospects."

Bearing with great sweetness and patience "the increasing pain" which came with "the coming months," he was

mercifully relieved on the 16th of April, 1861, to enter upon "that world beyond," of which he speaks in the following lines, "Suggested by a Recent Discourse of the Rev. Dr. Putnam:" —

"Science long watched the realms of space,
A planet's devious path to trace:
Convinced of heaven's harmonious law,
'A world beyond' Leverrier saw.

Thus when he views earth's sins and woes,
With a like faith the Christian knows
There is 'a world beyond' to prove
God's perfect wisdom, power, and love."

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